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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how policies on student behavior and attendance are used to push students into dropping out of school. Although in the public mind the proliferation of dropouts is associated with a drain on the economy, there is no real evidence to indicate either that there actually are large numbers of dropouts or that dropping out is directly connected to economic downturns. Mandatory education for all may be a mirage if one considers the role that behavior and attendance policies play in providing built-in mechanisms by which schools can expel nonconforming students. Both schools and students are aware that compulsory attendance only applies within a stipulated boundary. In the application of school behavior policies, students who breech protocol are more likely to be expelled from school than they are to be helped and supported in understanding and rectifying their behavior. School attendance policies serve similar ends. The stipulated consequences for nonattendance are the same as for any other prohibited behavior--exemption from the compulsory attendance rules. Infractions of both behavior and attendance policies are assumed to be the fault of the student, and the school is released from its duty to provide an education for the student without being implicated as the source of the problem. It is time to rethink the assumptions behind compulsory education, school policies, punishments, and "the dropout problem." More support for students and teachers and inventive ways to deal with problems without excluding students from schools are needed, as are internal mechanisms to ensure that schools do not contribute to student attrition and an examination of the application of compulsory education in the postmodern society. (Contains 33 references.) (Author/SLD)

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A History of Systemic Violence: School Policy and Student Attrition

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A History of Systemic Violence: School Policy and Student Attrition

It is generally accepted that public education should be mandatory for two time honoured reasons -- because it has positive affects on students' individual lives and because it aids them in becoming contributing citizens. This is probably true in most cases; the majority of students understand the exchange of compliance for credentials and are able to use the school system to further both the public and private good. But for some students, school is a hurtful, even dangerous, place from which they flee as soon as possible in spite of the best intentions of school personnel.

The reasons for school leaving are often a complicated mixture of personal issues and institutional factors which are sometimes organized into "demographic, family-related, school-related, and individual" categories (Anisef and Andres, 1996, p. 93). This categorization assumes that the individual's decision to leave school was a conscious and considered one. As Fine (1996) has suggested: "School-leavers are typically portrayed as young people who "choose" to exit an institution, cognizant or not of the presumed benefits of staying" (p. xi). It is possible that students leave because it is too uncomfortable at school to stay. Perhaps it is the "whitewashing (of) policies, ideologies, and practices (which) *produce* dropping out as widespread practice" (p. xi, italics in original). If students are leaving school because school policies force them out, these policies represent a form of systemic violence.

Systemic violence[1] is not intentional but is sometimes the by-product of school practices and policies intended to be in the students' best interests. It is "any institutionalized practice or procedure that adversely impacts on disadvantaged individuals or groups. . . . (and) may take the form of conventional policies and practices that appear to be neutral but result in discriminatory effects" (Epp & Watkinson, 1997, p.

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[1] See Systemic Violence in Education: Promise Broken, Albany N. Y.: SUNY Press, 1997 and Systemic Violence: How Schools Hurt Children, London: Falmer press, 1996, J. Epp and A. Watkinson (eds.)

xi). This definition includes school policies which are detrimental to students, even if only to small numbers of students.

School policies are powerful and necessary organizational mechanisms. Although they are intended to be impartial, "the scientific method cannot always provide the kind of clear answers that the policy maker often desires" (Ornstein & Miller, 1976, p. 3). Whatever their intention, school policies have the stamp of authority conferred upon them by both constitutional and legal means[2]. In this paper, although we cannot completely ignore the complex morass of government dictates and system-wide proclamations that govern our schools, we will focus on local school policies -- the quasi-legal by-laws stipulated by individual school systems or by the schools themselves which are intended to control the day to day activities of both the students and the teachers.

School policies are standardized regulations intended to be "teacher proof". That is, they are intentionally indifferent to individual responses. On the one hand, they provide a situation in which "students cannot but learn . . . and this learning is itself relatively indifferent to the persona of the teacher" (Curtis, 1995, p. 103). But they can also be used to prevent learning if they are used to exclude students who refuse to comply.

In this paper, we examine the historic aspects of school policies dealing with student behaviour and school attendance. We have used current policies from Canadian schools. The quotations used are authentic, but we have not identified the schools in order to preserve the generality of the argument[3]. We argue that school policies are intrinsically involved in the processes by which students drop out -- or as Fine (1996) would say, are pushed out -- of school. The distinction between students who choose to

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2 Section 93 of the Canadian Constitution specifies that matters of educational policy are to be left to the provinces (British North America Act, 1867). The American Constitution did not mention education so by Amendment X, it became the responsibility of individual states (Campbell et al., 1980, p. 21).

3 School board policies are usually available on the internet. Local school policies are available from the schools themselves. Policy manuals are generally loose-leaf binders; teachers are required to turn in (or destroy) old sections of policy as new ones arrive -- inconvenient for historians.

go and those who are forced to go are blurred when we speak of student attrition. We suggest that aspects of school policy have historically contributed to student alienation and have led students to "self select" out of the school system.

Policies concerning many other issues such as, testing, student placement, corporal punishment, and the reporting of child abuse, may also contribute to student attrition but they are not included in this discussion. It was particularly difficult to ignore the corporal punishment policies because they were so intrinsically related to student behaviour policies of the past[4]. However, even though forms of corporal punishment may still be found in schools today, the current policies we examined made no mention of it. Although there is still provision in the Canadian Criminal Code for a "school teacher, parent, or person standing in the place of a parent" to "use force by way of correction" (Section 43, Martins Annual Criminal Code, 1996, p. 86), its use is no longer a generally sanctioned option in schools[5].

A History of Dropping out?

> School-leavers are typically portrayed as young people who "choose" to exit an institution, cognizant or not of the presumed benefits of staying. Whitewashing policies, ideologies, and practices *produce* dropping out as widespread practice and *obscure* the very differentiated benefits of a degree. Such texts often narrate a fable in which staying in school allows a flight from poverty and an escape from racism as if schooling were fine and leaving were irrational; as if school dropouts were the primary cause of economic and social ills that bedevil our nations (Fine, 1996, p. xi, italics in original).

In this paragraph, Fine (1996) has compacted the issues associated with "dropouts" as they have been perceived since the inception of compulsory schooling. The history of "dropouts" is a struggle between forces seeking the economic good of the country while conflating the "social ills" of poverty and classism with education -- or the

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[4] Less than 10 years ago, it was reported that a child was being corporally punished in America's schools every 4 seconds of the school day (Children's Defense Fund, 1991, p. 5).

[5] This section of Canada's Criminal Code is currently being challenged in the courts by a group including our friend and co-editor, Ailsa M. Watkinson. When she appeared on a local talk show she was shocked by the vehemence with which callers opposed the removal of their "God given" right to hit children (personal communication, December, 1997).

lack thereof. At the root of this tension is a desire for control of individual citizens in order to avoid upsetting existing societal structures. The fundamental mechanism in the control process is the school policy document, whatever form it may take. To cite an early British educational reformer in 1673:

> Tis good Education of Youth, that makes virtuous men and obedient Subjects; that fills the Court with wise Counsellors, and the Common-wealth with good Patriots (Obadiah Walker, 1673, p. 12).

Similar notions persist in present day policies:

> The Board of Education will provide a quality education . . . . in a safe and consistent environment that encourages participation, tolerance, responsibility, and respect for self, others and country. (School Board Mission Statement, 1998)

The idea of conformity is strongly attached to expectations for student performance:

> Students are expected to attend class with all of their proper equipment, completed homework, and a neat and up-to-date notebook. . . . Continued neglect of class preparation by the student will result in counselling and parental contact. . . . If the problem continues, the student may be suspended and/or receive an "incomplete" in the course. (Student Code of Behaviour, 1998)

Students who do not meet the conformity requirement will be "policied" out of the course and eventually, out of the school. Although it is reported that every 10 seconds of the school day (in America), a student "drops out" (Children's Defense Fund, 1991, p. 5), if there were no compulsory education system, there would be nothing from which to drop out.

Compulsory schooling is a relatively new concept which is sometimes dated to the Education Act passed in Great Britain in 1870. This act made provision for state run elementary schools to augment the dame schools (run by individuals in their own homes), Sunday schools, factory schools and voluntary day schools already in place (Purvis, 1995, p. 3). The reasons for its introduction are usually associated with the need for an educated electorate because of the enfranchisement of working class men in 1867 and the need for a skilled, literate workforce[6]. However, H. G. Wells described the 1870 act, as

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[6] As Purvis (1995) pointed out, neither of these reasons applied to women as women rarely held jobs in the public sector and didn't get the vote until 1919 in Great Britain and 1929 in Canada. Purvis suggests that

"an act to educate the lower classes for employment on lower class lines" (Bernbaum, 1967, p. 10). Others have made similar observations:

> Schools for the poor, it was hoped, would bring about a new moral order amongst the working class: working-class children would be taught aspects of allegedly bourgeois morality, such as self-reliance, self-respect, deference to authority, that would help to civilize society. (Purvis, 1995, p. 9)

In 1880 in Great Britain, school attendance became compulsory for children under 13 (Bernbaum, 1967, p. 10). Exemptions could be made if children were needed to work. This exemption was widely used and during the First World War, "tens of thousands of children were effectively allowed to leave school before 13" (Bernbaum, 1967, p. 19). At the same time, politicians were using the war effort to argue the need for further universal education, not necessarily because schooling was in the best interests of the children, but because the army needed an educated fighting force. As Lloyd George said, "The most formidable institution we had to fight in Germany was . . . . the schools of Germany. . . . An educated man is a better worker, a more formidable warrior, and a better citizen" (Bernbaum, 1967, p. 16).

Education for adolescents was not mandatory. In 1904, in an attempt to encourage the more talented among the lower classes to further their education, elementary schools were advised to "discover individual children who show promise of exceptional capacity and to develop their special gifts . . . so that they may be qualified to pass at the proper age into secondary schools" (Maclure, 1937, p. 154). By 1907, secondary schools were required to offer 25% of their places, free, to children from the public elementary schools (Bernbaum, 1967, p. 11). But the school leaving age was not raised to 15 until the Education Act of 1944 which came into effect in 1947 (Bernbaum, 1967, p. 106).

It is only in recent decades that there has been an expectation that everyone -- except the unfortunate who "drop out" -- will complete a high school education. Prior to

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public education included women because of a belief that educated women would make better mothers and would exert control over their unruly offspring (Purvis, 1995, p. 8-9).

the 1950's, most Canadians left school after Grade 8 or 9 (Lawr & Gidney, 1973) to (depending on their gender) pursue a job and/or get married. In 1951, only 46% of Canada's 14-17 year olds were enrolled full-time beyond the 8th grade (Anisef & Andres, 1996, p. 86).

In the early 60's, leaving school before graduation was no longer considered "natural" but was defined as a threat to the well-being of the nation. Canada adopted the "human capital" theory, already in vogue in the United States, which held that knowledge was the engine that would drive the new economy. Between 1951 and 1971 the student population doubled, partly because of the baby boom and partly because of the expectation that students would stay in school (Anisef & Andres, 1977, p. 86).

It was also during the 50's and 60's that there was a proliferation of what Kelly (1996) has described as continuation schools -- alternative school settings for

> misfits within the conventional schooling system (who) have either dropped out or been pushed out. These misfits include disproportionate numbers of certain ethic minority, working-class, or low-income students, and girls who have violated middle-class norms of sexual behavior" (p. 106).

Kelly reports that today as many as one in ten students in some jurisdictions attends continuation classes (p. 107). These programs provide a holding place for students who, in another era, would have joined the workforce without being pressured to "finish school" first.

Although it may be an artificial connection, the "drop-out problem" has consistently been linked with economic concerns (Roman, 1996; Anisef & Andres, 1996). By the 1980's the workforce was considered "a resource to be managed in relation to the needs of the industrial sector competing on a highly competitive international market" (Smith & Smith, 1990, p. 186). Productive citizens were those who completed school and were therefore able to get jobs; students who looked like they were not going to graduate were labeled as "at-risk". The risks, it would seem, were comparatively low. In 1992, Statistics Canada reported that 20% of Canadians between 25 and 44 had not completed high school (Statistics Canada, 1992). The unemployment

rate was much lower than that so at least some of the high school "dropouts" were getting jobs.

Although it would be difficult to argue that quitting school would increase your chances of economic success,[7] it is also difficult to substantiate the conventional wisdom that finishing school will ensure a successful career. In the late 80's, the downturn of the economy meant that graduates and non-graduates alike were facing unemployment. This did not stop government and corporate groups from targeting "dropouts" as a potential economic drain -- not because of increased social assistance costs but because of reduced spending power. As the Conference Board of Canada reported: "Canadian society will lose more than $4 billion over the working lifetimes of the nearly 137,000 youth who dropped out rather than graduating with the class of 1989" (Lafleur, 1992, p. 1). Apparently, one of the roles of the school is to produce workers with good wages so they can become consumers.

The National Stay-in-School Initiative (Employment and Immigration Canada, 1990) was ironically at odds with itself in its understanding of "the problem" and its attempts to rectify it. Roman (1996) describes it as an example of a moral panic in which policy makers "create imaginary positions that redefine and rearticulate popular common sense, particularly through linguistic or discursive invocations of identities" (p. 153). In this case, the identity being rearticulated was that of the high school "dropout". The government admitted that they did not know how many dropouts there actually were and proceeded to incorporate this lack of data into part of their solution to the problem. They did a phone survey of 18 to 20 year olds which proved that their 30% estimated dropout rate was inflated. Only 21% of the 9,460 students surveyed had ever dropped out of school and many of those who had dropped out had either gone back to school or had

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[7] Successful dropouts include former British Prime Minister John Major, authors Herman Melville and Leon Uris, and a host of entertainers such as Billy Joel, Wayne Newton, Tracey Ullman, Lawrence Welk and Ellen Burstyn. Famous people expelled from school include Richard Pryor and Jackie Collins (Book of Lists, the 90's Edition, 1993, pages 38-40. Further lists of dropouts and expellees are found in both The Book of Lists #1 and The Book of Lists #2).

taken some other form of training after leaving school. Only 9% of the women and 15% of the men had actually dropped out and stayed out, and, because they were still quite young, there was a strong possibility that some of them would yet return to school (Anisef & Andres, 1996, p. 90-93; Roman, 1996).

Another part of the solution proposed by the Stay-in-School Initiative was a public campaign intended to apprise parents and youth of the "realities of the labor market and the need for students to complete their high school education" (Employment and Immigration Canada, 1990, p. 9). This demonstrates an assumption that if people knew that dropping out of school affected their chances of employment they would chose to stay in school. Studies which focus on the employment issues associated with dropouts ignore the possibility that schools themselves might be agents in the dropping out process. Such initiatives "fail to question school policies (and) practices in schools" (Anisef & Andres, 1996, p. 97).

The Origins of School Policies

In an early manual, the short title of which was The Training up of Children, first published in 1581, Richard Mulcaster exhorted teachers to display a list of "schoole ordinaunces" (Mulcaster, 1971, p. 276). Mulcaster, once Tutor to the Princess Elizabeth, made his living teaching the sons of London's well to do -- the only group which could realistically expect to be educated at all in that time and place[8]. Mulcaster's work appears to be a summary of advice based on current practice, so it can be assumed that posting "schoole ordinaunces" was usual:

> Both students and parents should be acquainted with these rules and regulation, which would cover the manner of teaching, advancement through classes, times of admission to the school, hours of attendance and holidays (Mulcaster, 1581, cited in Curtis, 1995, p. 85).

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[8]As Rousseau (1762) was later to comment "The poor man has no need of education for the education of his own station in life is forced upon him, and he can have no other" (p. 148).

There was also a list of misdemeanors and the number of "stripes" which would be required as punishment for each:

> Every teacher should have a "catalogue of school faultes, beginning at the commandmentes, for swearing, for disobedience, for lying, for false witnesse . . . then to the meaner heresies, trewentry, absence, tardies, and so forth." This code should also include the "number of stripes . . . . immitable though not many" which attached to each offense. (Curtis, 1995, p. 85)

A century later, in 1693, John Locke presented a contrary view. He felt that children could not be expected to understand the meaning of the posted rules and that they would quickly forget them. He also warned that it was unwise to introduce children to both the offense and the punishment at the same time as they might be tempted into calculated disobedience, measuring the risks against the punishment (Curtis, 1995, p. 93).

The suggested topics set out in Mulcaster's manual and Locke's treatise are similar to those in use in the policy manuals of today. Although there is no protocol for administering "stripes" there are "catalogues of school faultes" which include "verbal threats, racial, physical and/or sexual harassment or abuse; and the possession, threat to use or use of a weapon" (Code of student behaviour, 1998). The appropriate responses to these activities range from communication with student and/or parents to the suspension or expulsion of student, and the summoning of the police.

School policies rarely, if ever, make provision for attending to underlying issues which may be causing student behavior. The ultimate result of breaking school policy is eviction from the school. The use of this policy provides a legal way in which schools can jettison students who do not conform and gives their "misfits" a way out of the compulsory education conundrum. The cost of such practices can be high. Besides "releasing the bodies" of school leavers, these policies may "hollow the spirits of many school-stayers" (Fine, 1996, p. xiii).

Student Behaviour Policies

Peter Mclaren's (1994) graphic diaries which describe teaching in an inner-city school illuminated a nightmare of unruly children in a situation in which accepted rules have already failed. Movies[9] and television shows frequently portray individual teachers courageously battling unruly students but rarely do they question the format which supports and sustains these confrontations. The fact that schools confine 30+ students in close quarters with one adult, makes some form of control necessary. Although violence has always been one option, even early schools sought to shift control away from "spectacular punishments" toward an increasing reliance upon "moral and emotional discipline" (Curtis, 1995, p. 84). For example, in John Dury's The Reformed School, published circa 1651, he suggested that "spyes" be recruited from among the student population "that the lying deceitfull spirit may be hunted out from amongst them" (p. 36-37). As Curtis described it:

> In principle his "reformed school" sought to minimize the application of physical violence through the design of pleasurable pedagogical relations and structures. Scrutiny and observation -- ideally self-scrutiny and self-observation -- would be effective correctives. (Curtis, 1995, p. 88)

Nearly 150 years later, Joseph Lancaster, in 1805, advocated a system in which student monitors were placed on raised platforms at the ends of rows of students to hand out demerit tickets which contained messages such as "I have seen this boy idle" or "I have seen this boy talking". These were to be handed in to the teacher at the end of the day and the monitors themselves were monitored by the students and by other monitors so that they would also receive reprimands if they neglected their duties (Lancaster, 1805, p. 61).

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[9] For example: Blackboard Jungle, Christy, Dangerous Minds, Dead Poets Society, Ferris Buhler's Day Off, Good-bye, Mr. Chips, Grease, Hoosiers, Kindergarten Cop, Lean on Me, Mr Holland's Opus, Scent of a Woman, Stand and Deliver, Summer School, Taps, Teachers, The Browning Version, The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, The Principal, The Substitute, To Sir, With Love . . .

School policies of today are also mindful of neglect of duty. As one current teacher handbook admonishes:

> This is what we expect of our students. It is YOUR responsibility to ensure that YOUR students are aware of and adhere to these responsibilities.
>
> 1. Attend every class on time, every day.
> 2. Be attentive to teachers, guests or fellow students when they are making presentations.
> 3. Complete all homework and hand it in on time. . . . (etc., 12 items in all)
>
> Every department, every teacher has his (sic) own set of "classroom rules". Remember, situations get out of hand. It is much easier to slacken the reins than it is to tighten them. (Student Responsibilities, Teacher Handbook, 1998, p. 6, Underlining and capital letters in original)

Teachers are expected to control classroom behaviour in any way, within limits, in which they see fit. Ideally, as Obadiah Walker advocated in 1673, students will conform out of affection: "Beget [in the students] an affection towards you (for love begets love) and then the great difficulty of your work is past" (Obadiah Walker, 1673, p. 38). This attitude is articulated in present day policy:

> Teaching is a sharing of thought and feeling between students, teachers and a caring community in such a way that a relationship of mutual trust, respect and friendship is built. (Board Statement of philosophy, 1998, p. 2)

But when this fails, behaviour policies can always be implemented. The techniques suggested for the control of classes in one school policy document reflect this fundamental tension between compliance through cordiality and/or coercion:

> 1 Verbal request to stop. 2 Private talks with trouble makers. 3 Withdraw privileges. 4 Confrontation. 5 Isolation of a particular student. 6 Detention after class. 7 Give or take away points. 8 Assign extra work. 9 Ignore the behaviour. 10 Change classroom set up (seating, etc.). 11 Change teaching strategies. 12 Humour. 13 Work contracts. 14 Behaviour contracts. 15 Engage the student in a leadership role. 16 Clarify expectations with student/class. 17 Set deadlines. 18 Stop for a quiet time. 19 Class meeting/problem solving session. 20 Have the student teach. 21 Introduce cooperative learning. 22 Have students do a written analysis of problem. 23 Give choices in class. 24 Involve students in setting rules. 25 Positive feedback/rewards for desirable behaviour. 26 Send to the office. 27 Call parents. 28 Refer to Student Services. 29 Request removal of student from course/class. 30 peer counselling.

The final suggestions reduce the teacher's options to the two basic choices of all schools. Schools can try to help students to deal with their difficulties or they can throw

the students out. Although school policies make vague references to the possibility of referring students to other agencies for help, they make explicit references to the steps by which students can be expelled from school. There is more mention of calling the police than there is of calling in counselors and support agencies.

The same tension between control and support of students is evident in the instructions intended for teachers doing assigned supervisory duties at breaks and during the lunch hour. Teachers are told:

> Remember, during supervision, our role is to be non-confrontational. It is actually a good time to get to know some of the students you do not have in class. Your presence will be enough to curtail most problems. (Teacher Handbook, 1998)

However, getting to know the students does not in any way diminish the expectation that students will exhibit deference to authority. In a section entitled "Respect for Authority" one Code of Behaviour states:

> Students are expected to recognize and comply with the authority held by school and school-related authority figures. Requests made by them and expectations expressed in carrying out their duties are to be honoured and adhered to by students. (Student Code of Behaviour, 1998)

The consequences of non-compliance are:

> If a student demonstrates a lack of respect for authority, he/she can expect disciplinary action to be taken. Measures may include any or all of the following: contacting parents, police involvement, suspension, expulsion, counselling and loss of eligibility from all school activities. (Code of Student Behaviour, 1998)

The connection between compliance and the threat of expulsion is directly spelled out in school policy. Even though school attendance is supposedly compulsory for all students, those unwilling to comply with school policy might as well "drop out" because non-compliance will invoke whatever sections of the same policy that are necessary to force them out.

Schools are the only institution, outside of the penitentiary system, which individuals are required to attend, but schools have the luxury of expulsion policies by

which to rid themselves of unruly detainees. The parallel to prisons is mentioned in one handbook for teachers on how to control compulsory school assemblies[10]:

> Note: To avoid creating the image of "jail guards watching the inmates" we ask that teachers mingle with the students. Please do not stand around the perimeter of the gym. If students in the assembly are disruptive, speak to them. If you don't get the desired result, take them to the Office. (School Policy Statement, 1998, underlining and capitals in the original)

Once in the office, the procedure for removing students from the school is clear but there are no provisions for processes intended to keep them in school. Usually students are suspended rather than expelled. That is, they are barred from school and school activities for a specified number of days. This may happen as often as every 2 seconds of the school day to a public school student in America (Children's Defense Fund, 1991, p. 2). The reasons for expulsion cover a wide range of behaviours. According to Ontario Law, for example:

> A principal may suspend a pupil because of persistent truancy, persistent opposition to authority, habitual neglect of duty, the willful destruction of school property, the use of profane or improper language, or conduct injurious to the moral tone of the school or to the physical or mental well-being of others in the school. (Ontario Education Act, Section 23.1)

The principal, then, gets to decide what he or she considers "injurious to the moral tone of the school". In some places, in school suspensions are used. Students are removed from the regular school program to serve a specified amount of time (or until they meet a stipulated requirement) in a detention hall. Behaviour policies can also be used to remove students from regular classes to place them in alternative programs. When these provisions fail, expulsion is available as a more permanent solution in which students are forbidden to return to school at all, although in some jurisdictions, students must be re-admitted at the beginning of a new school year.[11]

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10 The school gymnasium in which these students are required to attend assemblies is not big enough to hold the student population. If all of them came to an assembly, school personnel would be in contravention of the fire regulations. This does not preclude the attendance requirement, nor does it prevent teachers from punishing students they catch "skipping". (personal conversation with teachers on site)

11 In Ontario, until recently, it was unlawful to expel students; they could only be suspended for up to 20 days. In 1995, some school boards defied that law because they felt that some students were too dangerous

Somewhere between the suspension and the expulsion are the alternative programs and schools intended to keep students who do not fit in with regular classes in school. By keeping them in school, officials are preserving their grant base, but there are also other administrative advantages. As one principal described it:

> Just get rid of them, dump 'em; it cleans out those kinds of kids from the regular school and makes the regular school a better school. And it does that. It makes the regular school less impacted by resistant kids, truant kids, tardy kids, behavior problem kids (cited in Kelly, 1996, p. 108).

As Dei (1996) pointed out: "It is not coincidental that many students who fade out of school also exhibit what the school system sees as "problem behaviours" (e.g., truancy, acts of delinquency, or disruptive behavior)" (p. 177). This response emphasizes the blurred issues which connect the problems of disruptive behaviour to the problems of tardiness and absenteeism.

Attendance Policies

Mandatory school attendance makes failure to attend school an illegal act. If the school system is unable to enforce attendance, the legal system kicks in. Exactly how many days a student is allowed to miss before he or she is considered to be truant is not always stipulated[12], but schools have no choice but to enforce their own truancy policies. They are in a "Catch 22" situation: to allow students not to attend school would be to violate the law, but, as many a 12-year-old has argued, mandatory school attendance requirements could be construed as unlawful imprisonment. Just as children in Canada are the only group of people that it is legal for an adult to hit, they are also the only group that it is legal to hold against their will.

Methods for monitoring attendance and enforcing attendance policies have varied little over the years. Hoole, in 1659, advocated the use of monitors to "give a bill to the

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to be allowed in the school. Since then, the Education Act has been changed to allow school boards to expel students whose "conduct is so refractory that the pupil's presence is injurious to other pupils or persons". (Ontario Education Act, Section 23.3)

[12] For example, in Nova Scotia, once warned, a student who misses 5 additional days is considered Truant. Persistent truancy may bring in child protection agencies.

Master of their names that are absent" (Curtis, 1995, p. 88). In 1805, Lancaster took attendance by having students stand against numbers inscribed on the walls of the schoolroom so that absentees could be quickly identified (Lancaster, 1805, p. 61). When students were detected they were publicly punished:

> When they are brought to school, either by their friends, or by a number of boys sent on purpose to bring them, the monitor of absentees ties a large card round his neck, lettered in capital letters, TRUANT; and he is then tied to a post. (Lancaster, 1805, cited in Curtis, 1995, p. 101)

Truancy as defiant behaviour

It could be argued that if school were a creative and interesting place, children would attend of their own accord. But school is not intended to be fun; one of its aims is to prepare students for the world of work: "The most important qualities an employer looks for in an employee are reliability, punctuality and regular attendance" (Attendance policy and procedures, 1997-98). The same statement of policy goes on to say:

> It is the responsibility of the student to attend school regularly and punctually. If attendance becomes a problem, counselling and parental assistance will be utilized to assist the pupil to overcome this problem. When this fails and the student has demonstrated his/her inability to cope with course attendance, he/she will be withdrawn from that course (Attendance policy and procedures, 1997-98, underlining in original).

The irony of this policy escapes no-one, particularly the student who is truant. Attendance policies are the school systems' solution to the Catch 22 of compulsory school attendance. The only way that the school system can justify the removal of an otherwise obedient student is through attendance policies. Lack of attendance denotes a problem with the individual student, not with the school. The school need take no responsibility for the fact that the student does not want to attend. It is the student who has, as the policy states, "demonstrated his/her inability to cope with course attendance."

The most common argument for the removal of students guilty of "persistent truancy" (Ontario Education Act, Section, 23.1) is the assumption that such students will fall so far behind that they will not be able to pass the course; therefore they are wasting everybody's time and should be struck from the roll in order to make room for others. In

a compulsory school system this argument rings rather hollowly. There is no need to force one student out to make room for another.

The removal of a student may have both positive and negative ramifications for school administrators. On the one hand, when students are policied out, their absence removes a whole host of problems and day to day frustrations. Teachers like to teach standard lessons based on the assumption that all students have the prerequisite information. When irregular attendees are gone, it easier to "keep the class together". Also, students who have irregular attendance patterns often have trouble concentrating may cause disciplinary difficulties by influencing other students around them. Again, the school places the blame for disruption on the student. There are no provisions in most schools for testing and counselling which might address the issues against which the student is intuitively or purposefully rebelling. The students themselves may or may not be unaware of their motives but the "problem" remains lodged with the student. By this policy the school is relieved of a problem and whether or not the student believes it is his or her own fault is immaterial to the school -- "the problem" becomes somebody else's. The removal of that student may cost the school in administrative grants but administrators can justify the "costs" in terms of peaceful surroundings for those who stay.

The school does not necessarily have to forfeit the grant money in order to remove students from the regular school system. As Kelly (1996) has reported, in some jurisdictions, as many as 10% of students are enrolled in continuation or alternative programs (p. 107). If 10% of students are not "fitting in" with the regular school system, a curious observer might wonder why the focus for deliberation about the "misfits" is on the students rather than on the schools. What is it about regular compulsory schools that convinces 10% of the students that alternative forms of education are more suited to their needs? And what happens to these students if these alternative programs also fail them as is often the case? (Fine 1996; Kelly, 1996).

Putting in Time

A separate aspect of the argument concerning absenteeism is the assumption that the benefits of education are linked to the actual number of hours that students spend in the classroom. This may or may not be the case. Some students can miss large sections of in-class instruction and still maintain a good class average. Marks and marking systems are largely dependent upon the structures set up by the teachers for assessment of students. If there is a strong reliance on weekly quizzes and daily assignments, or if the subject matter is complex and the student does not have access to other sources of information, sporadic attendance will have a drastic affect on student marks. But there are students who could complete the requirements for the course without attending the classes at all (a fact to which many university and college graduates can attest). Why is it then, that compulsory attendance is so important to high school educators?

Discussions of student attrition rates assume that students cannot gain the necessary credentials without actually attending school for the stipulated period of time. For example, students who write senior matriculation equivalency tests to prove their knowledge and/or skills are still considered "dropouts" because they have "chosen" not to complete the process in the ordinary way.

Conformity to rules *and spending the appropriate number of years doing that* are both components of becoming an educated person. Education which focuses on knowledge and exempts individuals from the "struggle" have long been viewed with suspicion. In 1861, it was suggested that individuals be allowed to obtain university degrees by writing an exam which would demonstrate their knowledge of the subject area without attending classes. The principal of Queen's College in Kingston, Ontario spoke in vehement opposition:

> There is something better than the mere possession of knowledge. Mental culture--the training of the faculties to proper action and academic discipline are objects of higher import in the education of the young. A student's future success in life depends not so much on the knowledge he has acquired as on the way in which it has been acquired. (Gidney & Millar, 1995, p. 117)

The same principal adds that "knowledge may be acquired in such a way as permanently to injure the mental faculties and habits of the young" (Gidney & Millar, 1995, p. 117). We would agree with that statement, but to use it as an argument against compulsory schooling would be to twist his words to mean the opposite of his intent.

Time served is a generally accepted determination of adequate schooling. School policies, and in some cases government guidelines, often set out the perameters for the education process in terms of hours or minutes. Curriculum guides often stipulate minutes or hours per topic and the school day is broken into the specific number of minutes to be devoted to individual subjects. An example from a provincial ministry guideline:

> A credit is granted in recognition of the successful completion of a course that has been scheduled for a minimum of 110 hours. In granting credits, principals shall ensure . . . . the amount of work expected in the scheduled time . . . [was] significant [and] the course required . . . an amount of work at a level that could reasonably be expected. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1987)

It seems that "putting in the time" is another way in which our school systems resemble our penitentiaries.

Attendance requirements and behaviour expectations are both aspects of education which are not about "learning" but are about compliance and control. The connectedness between attendance and achievement is specified in this school policy in which teachers are told to: "Keep accurate records of student achievement and attendance on a daily basis". It is no surprise that the concepts of achievement and attendance are unmistakably conflated in school doctrine, but perhaps the real truth of the intentions of compulsory public schooling becomes evident when behaviour is added to the mix. The next line the of the same school policy states: "Be prepared to document student attendance, achievement and behaviour if requested". Are these three really separate entities or does the school system judge them all as one?

Conformity and Control: Where School Policy and Student Attrition Meet

> [We need] a critical analysis of the institutional power structures in which learning, teaching, and administration of education take place in the public school system, and how these structures function to alienate some youth while engaging others. (Dei, 1996, p. 184)

Although the public has generally accepted as fact the idea that students who leave school do so of their own stubborn volition, researchers who have spoken to these students find that there is another side to the story. For example, one of the students interviewed by Dei (1996) pointed out: "Those who go astray are pushed aside and made to feel it is their fault or some personal weakness in character. There is no serious effort to find out why some of us behave contrary to what is expected of us" (p. 177). Students who misbehave are shown the door and the school gladly closes it behind them.

Perhaps this attitude toward the less malleable students has its origins in the original purposes of compulsory education. Although the ruling classes felt that there was a need for educated workers, at least those who could read and write, they did not want people who could think and therefore rebel against their station in life:

> To reconcile the lowest class of mankind to the fatigues of constant labour, and the otherwise mortifying thought of a servile employment, pains should be taken to convince them, when young, that subordination is necessary in society; that they ought to submit to their masters or superiors in everything that is lawful (George Chapman, 1784, 73-74).

Perhaps the schools have taken Chapman's advice to its extreme, that is, they have taken the subordination of spirit and made it into something that is lawful. It is possible that this process has backfired. Rather than encouraging the more talented among the lower classes to aspire to higher status through education, we may have ensured that the most intelligent and creative among us are squeezed onto the margins by our desire to assure conformity. If we were to view the people pushed out of our school system as the best and the brightest, the tragedy of school leaving would have an even greater economic significance. Although common knowledge would have us believe that those who leave school are the dull and unimaginative, the opposite may be true. There is some evidence to indicate that school leavers are not necessarily students of inferior

intelligence. Michelle Fine's work indicates that there are important differences between "at risk" students placed in alternative classes who stay in school and those who do not:

> As it turned out, school-leavers were significantly less depressed, more resilient, and more critical of their constrained economic opportunities. In contrast, students who stayed in school were significantly more depressed, self-blaming, and politically conservative. (Fine, 1996, p. xii)

However, the damage to the psyche of students who have difficulty in school happened to both groups whether they stayed in school or not. This damage is what Bourdieu (1991) called the "rites of institution" in which he insisted that the word "institution" should be read as a verb instead of a noun. "The act of institution . . . signifies to someone what his (sic) identity is, but in a way that both expresses it to him and impresses it on him by expressing it in front of everyone" (p. 121). The role of the school is to confer "social magic" on those students who are able to successfully navigate their schooling years, that is upon those willing and able to conform to conventions and connect with the establishment:

> Students who refuse to be institutionalized resist this "social magic." They may leave . . . . or they may drown . . . Either way, schools are structured so that critics pay a price (academic, economic, or mental health) *and* their analyses melt into self-blame over time. (Fine, 1996, p. xiv, italics in original)

School policy can be used to ensure that some students do not get that stamp of "social magic". Many marginalized students believe emphatically that the school used policy in an unfair way in order exclude them. Kelly's (1996) examination of alternative schools is only one example of "misfits" forced into alternative programs:

> Sometimes these [alternative school] students claimed that they had been pushed into leaving their comprehensive school, and [the school's] principal acknowledged to me that as a vice principal, he had been aware that a number of teachers "baited" students they perceived as problems until such students committed an act that warranted their removal, a practice even he had engaged in on occasion. (Kelly, 1996, p. 111)

We have already seen how school policy makes it easier to drop a student from the roll than it is to encourage them to stay. The students consigned to the alternative school programs were not out of danger of being "pushed out" completely (Kelly, 1996, p. 118). The schools surrounding one of the alternative schools in Kelly's study were so

in need of places to send their "misfits" that various policies were enacted to encourage students to drop out of the system altogether. These included a requirement that recently transferred students show up, on time and with a notebook, at a prolonged orientation class which ran every morning for several weeks. If they came to the class late, they were not allowed to stay; and if they missed too often, they were required to repeat the entire orientation process. Students forced to repeat were likely to choose to leave instead.

Another policy required disruptive and/or tardy students to go to the "Responsibility Room" *to copy rules from the student handbook*. As if this punishment was not mind numbing enough, the man in charge of the room was hostile and abusive:

> Girls reported being shocked, upset, and inclined to skip future detention, whereas boys were prone to swear, flee, or challenge the disciplinarian to a fight. As one teacher explained: "The kids [especially boys] who get sent to Mr. Zuniga are at risk of suspension because they're just not as equipped as adults to deal with his abrasive personality. They end up fighting him over piddling offenses like being tardy". (Kelly, 1996. p. 117-18)

The irony of a school administrator assigning such a teacher to such a task cannot be missed. An adult forced to deal with an "abrasive" personality has options. A child sent to a detention room has none. If school officials were genuinely interested in keeping "at risk" students in school, they would not subject them to such an ordeal.

If the orientation sessions and the responsibility room failed to persuade students to drop out, there was always a bureaucratic process by which officials and school counselors could withdraw students for miscellaneous reasons not otherwise covered in school policy and list their removal under code "other". Kelly (1996) reported seeing the code used to remove students from school for smoking marijuana, chronic absenteeism, failing grades and fighting.

Anther bureaucratic way to force students out was to ignore the paper work. Kelly (1996) reported cases in which teachers or counselors requested that particular students not be sent re-registration information. The students could then be listed as "over 18--not reenrolled" and no questions would be asked. Although some teachers

were upset by the "push out" process, they were not likely to get involved except in cases where a particular student had shown academic potential or had participated in school activities (Kelly, 1996, p. 118).

The students in Dei's (1996) study cited similar official and unofficial means by which difficult students were discouraged. In many instances, high school leavers leave in frustration and indignation at a process which forces people into restrictive, often boring and sometimes abusive situations in the name of education. As one dropout/pushout described it, he left school because he had a "desire to regain control over (his) life" (cited in Dei, 1996, p. 173). An eloquent description was provided by one young woman who said:

> The school atmosphere lacks respect, principles, values, and invades everything about one's character. If you permit it, it totally breaks down and reconstructs another character . . . you leave high school stripped . . . grade after grade, level after level, something was being chipped away and what was being replaced wasn't great enough. . . . I wasn't going to let that happen to me. . . . And so I left. (Dei, 1996, p. 178).

The students that Dei (1976) interviewed were 150 Black students who were either "at risk" or who had already dropped out of school. In his analysis, Dei described an "antischool culture of resistance" (p. 177) in which students "find ways to antagonize and manipulate the authority structures". This, in turn, meets with resistance from school authorities who "counter the threats of rebellious behavior . . . (by) enforce(ing) its norms, rules, and regulations" (p. 178). Then:

> Disenchanted with the whole process of schooling, eventually "rebellious" students fade out. Thus, dropping out becomes, in a sense, a reflection of the student's failure to adapt to the exclusive control over the school by the authority structures. In this context some students explain their leaving school prematurely as the actualization of a desire to be in charge of their own destinies and to confront some of the basic contradictions in society. (Dei, 1996, p. 178)

As we noted earlier, although there is a perception that the "misfits" who drop out of school are most likely students who lack the intelligence or the skills to succeed in school, the opposite may be true. The young woman who spoke of having her "self" chipped away and reconstructed by the school system, suggested that: "It takes a strong . .

. person with inner strength to see what the current education system does to you and to leave it (Dei, 1996, p. 179).

Strict school level policies may be forcing some of our most talented students to choose the alternatives associated with dropping out of school. These students may carry with them a disportionate helping of the human resources so valued by our economy. From the margins, they are forced to turn their talents into other venues in order to survive. The literacy rates of prison inmates confirm their high dropout rates. The ones who do not get caught may also be high school dropouts who have successfully turned their talents as subversives in an unwelcoming school system to a personal advantage.

If an argument for re-evaluation of school policy and practice is not convincing when grounded on human rights and equal opportunity platforms, surely it could be effective if argued from an economic deficiency point of view. By twisting school policy into a weapon to clear our schools of non-conformists, we force some of our most talented people into the margins from which they have little opportunity to return to the mainstream in order to contribute to our overall societal well-being.

The dropout/pushout problem cannot be addressed through a simplistic cause and effect model. The problem requires "a grounded theory based on students' articulation of their lived experiences and a good conceptual analysis of how the diverse experiences of students inside and outside the school system contribute to dropping out" (Dei, 1996, p. 174). As Dei says:

> there is a powerful message for educators when students fail to do homework or pay attention in class, when students prefer to hang out in the hallways instead of being in class, when students skip classes, when students show a general lack of respect for school rules and regulations, when students cannot connect or identify with the school. We need to view these behavioral patterns and strategies critically as students' ways of questioning the very foundations of schooling in our society (Dei, 1996, p. 184).

An Extreme Conclusion

When "these behavioral patterns and strategies" are viewed through a critical lens, the school system can be seen as an intentional screening device intended to encourage the attrition of certain types of students. The dropout theory may be the unconscious societal culmination of a century old paradox of public compulsory education. The universal education process, which of itself is ultimately democratic, would force equal access and opportunity for all children on a world which is inherently classed and hierarchically structured. Equal opportunity for all students would put an end to a process which assures influence for some and subservience for others. What the controlling interests in society really wanted was an educated population which could be taught to run factories and to load machine guns. How could these newly educated people be prevented from critical thought which would lead to an eventual questioning of existing societal inequities?

The solution to this paradox of proffered equality and withheld rewards is buried in a school system in which students are sorted using artificial means which value only those aspects of intelligence which will allow them to fit in with existing social norms. The school system becomes a sorting machine (Spring, 1976) intended to place individuals in categories according to narrowly defined measures of academic achievement. Students who do not exhibit that type of intelligence are persuaded to enter other forms of training. The sorting process is usually enough to discourage and distract students, but if this fails to "fail them", the school system's inattention to personal needs and neglect of differentiated understandings can be used to encourage them to self select out of the system; students with personal problems or emotional disabilities can be discarded through a process of school "ignorance" of the problem and the school's lack of jurisdiction because personal and emotional matters are not part of the school's mandate. Then there are those students unwilling to adapt to routine and who are frustrated into rebellion by sheer boredom. These students are easily removed through the use of

ordinary disciplinary procedures. Those who refuse to accept the basic ground rules of acceptance and subservience are policied out of the system, by the use of behaviour policies or, failing that, by absenteeism by-laws.

This process requires that most of society and most of the individuals within it have accepted some basic assumptions. First we must accept that compulsory education is essential for all children and that without it both the children and the country they will not be able to perform in a "global" economy. Then we must provide a hierarchy of talents and abilities and accept the assumption that certain talents are more valuable than others. Then we need to ascribe to the theory that it takes a stipulated number of hours and years in order to become educated. Once we have agreed to that, it is simple to go from there to the assumption that anyone who does not put in his or her minimum number of hours cannot succeed in school. We can then set up a series of examination and testing structures which prove that this assumption is true. Then, people who do not perform well on those tests can be assigned to lower paying work because they do not have the required education. The process of rewards for becoming educated can be limited to include only those students who can be convinced that learning can only be achieved by subservience to authority. Students who insist on thinking for themselves and upon using their training to rationally challenge the system are excluded from it by means of behaviour and attendance policies. In all probability, these are the cream of the "disadvantaged" crop. When all of these assumptions have been accepted, even intelligent students can be convinced to accept the assumption that they have failed the system rather than the suggestion that the system may have failed them.

A Less Extreme Conclusion

The process of dropping out is a complex one which affects indeterminable numbers of students and has equally indeterminable affects on the students themselves and on the society in which they live. It is possible that there is no real link between success in school and success in society. However, there can be no doubt that success in school helps the individual's chances for economic success.

It has been argued in this paper that educational policies detailing expected student behaviour can be used by institutions to persuade students unwilling to conform to withdraw from school and accept the attendant risks of reduced financial opportunity while forfeiting further educational opportunity in institutions of higher learning. Government and media reports of drop-outs contribute to a widely held perception that students who do not finish school are, at best, lazy or lacking in intelligence and, at worst, expensive freeloaders or dangerous malcontents. It is entirely possible that dropouts are simply intelligent people who were unable to accept the conditions of the school system. If we are to require students to attend schools we should, in turn be required to provide them with educational experiences that will meet their needs rather than school policies designed to disparage and discourage them.

But What Can We do?

The most obvious response to a system which uses policy to police student behaviour and uses policy to force non-compliant students out of the system, would be to examine and revise the school policies. But school policies do not operate in a vacuum. We cannot change one aspect of the system without making changes in other areas as well.

A beginning would be to examine our motives for public compulsory education and to rethink the premises behind it. Is universal education appropriate in our information society? Are our methods of providing an education still meeting our needs?

Are there groups of children who would benefit from some other form of education? Should we be providing different kinds of instruction for different groups of children? Are there children who should not be in the public education system at all?

Assuming that we decide to keep the compulsory public education system, we could then examine our expectations of it. Perhaps it is time for the school systems to accept responsibilities other than the purely academic ones that it has now. Should schools be linked to other social agencies to provide students with a complete background of support in all areas of their lives? Could schools provide emotional, social, even financial help for students who need it? Additional resources would be necessary for schools to take on these issues but an amalgamation of the schools with other forms of societal support would have clear benefits if those benefits included decreases in the jail population and diminished crime rates.

The alternatives intended to keep students in school would mandate that when students experienced difficulties in school and focused attention on these difficulties by becoming discipline problems, schools would aid the teachers in dealing with the difficulty. Instead of simply removing the student from the school, emphasis would be placed on examining the reasons for the student behaviour which would include an examination of the teaching methods and educational processes being used. If the school were to find that teachers were not meeting the needs of students, perhaps rather than forcing the students to withdraw, schools could provide support for teachers to encourage them in finding ways to do that. There could be flexible assignment of students to teachers. Students could be encouraged to "shop" for a teacher that they felt they could work with. Teachers who did not have enough students wishing to learn in their classrooms could be given counselling and upgrading or be reassigned to other duties. If this did not improve their demand among students, then perhaps these teachers could be encouraged into another profession.

These changes would shift the focus of teaching from controlling students to attending to student needs in order to help them become contributing members of society. Although this is often the avowed intention of the school, the reality of school policies would indicate otherwise. In a world which truly believed that this was the purpose of schooling, students in contravention of school policy would become the focus of a support system intended to encourage rather than disbar them. In a better world, we would surround recalcitrant students with support and find ways to help them to succeed. It is in our best interests to find that better world.

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A History of Systemic Violence: School Policy and Student Attrition

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Abstract

Students who drop out of school do not necessarily do so by choice. This paper examines how policies on student behaviour and attendance are used to push students into dropping out of school. The expectation that all students should finish high school is a relatively modern post-war concept which is responsible for the implementation of various types of "continuation" alternatives for students unable or unwilling to succeed in the regular school program. Although in the public mind the proliferation of dropouts is associated with a drain on the economy, there is no real evidence to indicate either that there are actually large numbers of dropouts or that dropping out is directly connected to economic downturns.

Mandatory education for all may be a mirage if we consider the role that behaviour and attendance policies play in providing built in mechanism by which schools can disbar nonconforming students. Both the schools and the students are aware that compulsory attendance only applies within a stipulated boundary.

Behaviour policies are necessitated by the fact that large groups of students are placed in close quarters for many hours at a time. They have traditionally demonstrated the tension between externally forced compliance and internally motivated obedience, that is, between methods requiring a mixture of cordiality and coercion. However, in the application of school policies, students who breech protocol are more likely to be expelled from school than they are to be helped and supported in understanding and rectifying their behaviour.

School attendance policies serve similar ends. The stipulated consequences for non-attendance are the same as for any other prohibited behaviour -- exemption from the compulsory attendance rules. Infractions of both behaviour and attendance policies are assumed to be the fault of the student and the school is released from its duty to provide an education for that student without being implicated as a source of the problem.

Studies of school leavers suggest that, contrary to common belief, it is not necessarily only the ignorant and unteachable who leave school early. Often dropouts are intelligent and creative -- if defiant. If it is true that by leaving school early they are doomed to unproductive lives, that is a great loss to society.

It is time to rethink the assumptions behind compulsory education, school policies, punishments and "the dropout problem." We need (1) more support for students and teachers in dealing with personal and pedagogical issues (2) inventive ways to deal with problems without excluding people from schools (3) internal mechanisms to ensure that schools are not contributing to student attrition (4) an examination of the application of compulsory education in a post-modern society.